

[Column 6 Set 2] Exploring More Mysteries of Living: Explore Ethics



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Why these Columns? Because human behavior causes global problems, and solving these problems requires changes in human behavior... So *everyone* benefits from knowing something about the natural science of human behavior that these columns describe. See the 72 columns of the first set, in the *Explaining Mysteries of Living* book or on **BehaviorInfo.com**, for the *basics* of this science.

The last column considered rights and their connection to values. This column turns to ethics and their connection to rights, all as part of the interconnected sequence of reinforcers, values, rights, ethics, and morals.

While the term *values* refers to reinforcers, and the term *rights* refers to access to values (i.e., to claims of access to reinforcers) the term *ethics* refers to respecting those rights claims for clear access to valued reinforcers. We define ethical behavior as behavior respectful of rights claims. Those who respect our rights claims earn the label, “ethical” or, rather, their behavior of respecting our rights claims earns the label, “ethical behavior,” and we appreciate the ethics we say they “show” by respecting our rights claims.

By now the kind of subtle agential phrasing present in that last sentence likely elicits some reader wincing or annoyance responses, because readers know that no inner agents exist either to display ethics or to order the body to show respect for rights claims. Why this agential phrasing occurs here (and elsewhere) makes a fascinating discussion, but goes way off topic. Those it interests can find details in Chapter 22 of my general–audience primer, listed in the reference.

Concerning the basic point about ethics, here is a quick example of how we can avoid the agential phrasings, an example that shows why we simply take them as verbal shortcuts, but otherwise seldom bother with them. While stimuli evoke one’s (i.e., a body’s mediation of) labelling of those who respect (i.e., of bodies that mediate respecting) our rights claims as *ethical*, only the behavior of respecting the rights claims actually earns the label *ethical behavior*. Reducing the inner agents to mere verbal shortcuts enables appropriate use of the economical, if agential, phrasing (e.g., “one’s,” “those,” “our”).

Some further discussion involves the term *ethical community*, so let's define it. We define an ethical community as a group of people who share respect for one or more rights that each one holds in common with the others. While the label only occurs now, we have encountered ethical communities already.

Recall that broad group of all law-abiding citizens in the U.S. who share respect for self defense and the constitutional Second Amendment right of individuals to keep and bear arms. They constitute an ethical community. We can easily recognize other large and small ethical communities, sometimes mutually supportive or overlapping, at other times neutral with respect to each other, and occasionally at odds with each other or in other ways in competition.

You can find groups respecting the rights of other animals to the preservation of their natural habitats. You can find groups respecting the rights of children to an effective education. You can find groups respecting the rights of medical patients and behaviorally disturbed clients to effective interventions. You can find groups respecting the rights of people to earn and enjoy the fruits of a living wage.

You can even find a small group that respects the rights of group members to take whatever they want from others. The larger group, however, from whom they take whatever they want, describes the members of this smaller group as criminals.

Among many more groups respecting various rights, you will find a large group respecting the rights of humanity to a planetary home free of overpopulation and pollution and so on. All of these and many more constitute ethical communities.

Even respondent conditioning affects ethics and ethical communities. For instance the occurrence of coercion, perhaps in the form of punitive enforcement practices, respondently conditions negative emotional reactions, particularly of group members, to the stimuli that accompany responses *of members*, or outsiders, that disrespect the community's ethics.

As a result even slight deviations from the conditioned accepted practices of the ethical community automatically elicit these aversive emotional reactions. One can escape from these reactions by returning to and maintaining the group's ethical practices, or perhaps by utterly total separation from the group.

Cults, which overlap little with other groups, provide an extreme example that few consider ethical. As a less extreme example, after the extensive operant and respondent conditioning during life and medical school, a doctor may experience—contrary to training—sympathy for an in-pain, terminally ill patient who requests help in arranging an earlier and more dignified end, rather than waiting for the otherwise guaranteed extremely anguished end.

Even before considering such alternatives, the question itself, which contradicts ethical and legal aspects of medical school conditioning, elicits strong negative emotions. Given the doctor's conditioning history, these circumstances evoke only medically acceptable steps, such as drugging the patient into a stupor that persists while other processes then lead to a less painful demise.

The patient dies with less dignity but the doctor escapes not only the aversive emotional

reactions but also the accusations of unethical behavior that could lead to jail time. That others would argue strenuously against such jail time would be of limited consolation to an incarcerated physician. Some later columns, on death, continue this theme supporting dignified dying.

Also, recognize the automatic conditioning of positive emotional reactions, particularly of group members, to the stimuli that accompany responses that respect the community's ethics. Again, cults provide an extreme example.

For groups whose membership overlaps other groups, more common examples would include the emotions experienced as feelings of success and belonging that stimuli elicit when these stimuli indicate other's respect for your values. The same conditioning makes similar stimuli elicit the emotions experienced as feelings of in-group camaraderie, solidarity, and mutual respect and support.

Such relations show some of how the natural science of behavior addresses ethics (and values and rights, and soon, morals). These include connections of ethics to respondent processes via the inevitable pairing of body and behavior. They also include not only the conditioning of positive and negative emotional reactions to stimuli associated with ethical and unethical behavior respectively, but also some connections between operant conditioning and ethics, via rights, values, added reinforcers, and the subtracted reinforcers that occur as the reduction of negative emotions after stimuli evoke successful escape from unethical behavior.

The next column concludes our brief exploration of ethics.

A full description of the mentioned general-audience primer, *What Causes Human Behavior—Stars, Selves, or Contingencies?* appears on the BOOKS page of www.behaviorology.org where you can also find a full description of Lawrence Fraley's book, *Dignified Dying—A Behaviorological Thanatology*.

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